

"Groundhog Heroes" on the march

Federally funded camp is nerve center for volunteer efforts after tornadoes

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KERI RASMUSSEN Staff Photographer
Kieron Weidner, left and Stephanie Drake help to run base camp operations at the Lake County Volunteer Camp at the Church of God campground site on County Road 473 in Leesburg on Tuesday.



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Kiana Kahlbaum, left and Maria Zupan help to run volunteer base camp operations at the Lake County Volunteer Camp at the Church of God campground site on County Road 473 in Leesburg on Tuesday. The volunteer camp provides boarding and manages people who are helping with the cleanup and recovery effort after the Feb. 2 tornadoes.

LEESBURG - It took more than six years and a catastrophic disaster to get the program off the ground, but Lake County is now home to the first federally funded volunteer base camp.

The camp, at the Church of God Campground in Leesburg on County Road 473, has been nicknamed Groundhog Village, after the series of tornadoes that devastated the area and killed 20 people on Groundhog Day earlier this month.

Home to about 100 volunteers, or Groundhog Heroes, currently, the camp also serves as a clearinghouse for all the volunteer efforts in Lake County as the area continues to clean debris and restore their lives.

On Feb. 2 three tornadoes ripped through Sumter, Lake and Volusia counties, destroying scores of homes in Lady Lake and Lake Mack.

"We are doing whatever we can do get these people whole again so they can get back to normal," Glenn Kasper, Sr., of the Christian Contractors Association, said.

Kasper has been dubbed Mayor of Groundhog Village and oversees the operations of the camp. It took until a week after the tornadoes to get it up and running, but Kasper said the time frame was actually fast considering the amount of ground they had to cover.

"We had to go through the proper channels, it's a lot to set up," he said.

Now that it is set up, the county's Emergency Operations Center has a clearing house to send requests for help or those looking to volunteer.

"It's so we're not duplicating efforts," county spokesman Chris Patton said.

Kasper said in the past there were problems with organization, as groups and individuals tried to volunteer without any proper channels to go through.

Now all volunteers are run through background checks and given identification as well as kept track of so the county knows where to send food or first aid.

"It's for the safety and well being of the community," Kasper said.

The camp is now running at full speed and is home to several groups looking to help. Most of the camp's

population is made of AmeriCorps volunteers, though a number of faith-based volunteer groups and individuals also come through there.

Carrie Hoeppner, who was brought over from Seminole County to help with the Emergency Operation Center, said the number of volunteers coming through operation Groundhog Heroes was growing.

"We have 176 volunteers and those numbers continue to increase each day," she said.

Nicholas Wouten, 22, from Washington state, had been in AmeriCorps for five months but said this was the first time he had been assigned to a disaster area.

"It's just amazing," he said. "People are strong out here."

About 90 AmeriCorps volunteers are on site now, though the camp has capacity to hold between 250-299 volunteers if need be. Groups from as far away as Alaska and as close as Mississippi are on hand to volunteer.

Wouten said he felt relief efforts like this one were both his calling, and a source for some good karma.

"I'm totally stoked about this, this is what coming and volunteering is all about," he said. "If my house blows down, I hope somebody will help me out."